

Bruce J. Noble, Jr.

CRM in Harpers Ferry National Historical Park

An Overview



Post card published by Walter E. Dittmeyer, Harpers Ferry, WV.

Why do a thematic issue of CRM that focuses on a single national park? In part, because it has never been done before.

Given that the National Park Service exercises stewardship responsibilities over many of the nation's premier cultural resources, an issue devoted to outlining the manner in which one national park manages its cultural resources seems entirely appropriate. Yet, in another sense, doing an issue of CRM because it has never been done before is somewhat like climbing a mountain "because it is there." In other words, a more pragmatic explanation would seem to be in order. Let me provide some background about both the genesis and the aims of this CRM issue.

Although most Americans tend to think of national parks in connection with mountains, trees, birds, and animals, all national parks have cultural resources as well. Harpers Ferry National Historical Park is fortunate to have an outstanding mix of both natural and cultural resources. But precisely because this is a national historical park, cultural resource issues tend to figure prominently in daily park management decisions. Historians, archeologists, interpreters, and other cultural

resource professionals work closely with the superintendent on a variety of high profile park management issues.

Because this scenario may not be typical of all units of the national park system, I would hope that this issue of CRM manages to provide some insight into the operational priorities of a national historical park.

As a national historical park, historical research has always had an important role in National Park Service management of Harpers Ferry. Established in 1944, park development in Harpers Ferry began about a decade later. Park files still bear witness to the work done by park historians in the 1950s to further understanding of John Brown's 1859 raid and the Civil War history that both played prominent roles in the decision to establish Harpers Ferry as a national monument in 1944. Although the park's interpretive focus has now broadened to include new themes such as African-American history, industry, transportation, and environment, the work done by those early park historians continues to shape a portion of our present thinking about Harpers Ferry.

Although historical research was well underway in the 1950s, "cultural resource management," as we presently understand the term, did not really exist in these days preceding the National Historic Preservation Act of 1966. Nevertheless, the park had inherited a number of severely deteriorated buildings and many important cultural resource management issues had to be addressed if these buildings were to be made safe for public visitation. Lacking the present-day legislative and philosophical framework for confronting complex preservation questions, some decisions were made that we would now want to question with the benefit of 20/20 hindsight. For example, the park's original interpretive focus spanned the years between John Brown's raid in 1859 and the conclusion of the Civil War in 1865.

Shenandoah Street, Harpers Ferry, in the 1950s before NPS began building restoration activities.



This emphasis led to the unfortunate decision to demolish a number of historical buildings that had been constructed after the 1865 date. While we may bemoan those losses today, it is important to remember that these events took place long before the creation of a National Register program to sug-



High Street, Harpers Ferry, in the mid-1950s. Sign reading "Danger Old Buildings" provides insight into out-moded NPS management philosophy.

gest that any cultural resource over 50 years of age has potential historic significance.

The National Historic Preservation Act introduced new management perspectives to Harpers Ferry National Historical Park and throughout the national park system. In the case of Harpers Ferry, many of those new perspectives are embodied in the park's 1980 Development Concept Plan (DCP). This plan called for an expanded interpretive focus that would include the entire 19th century. Thus, resource preservation would focus on buildings from this entire time period, rather than the narrow emphasis on the 1859-1865 period.

Recommendations included in the DCP also led the park to further protect its cultural resources by limiting vehicular traffic in the Lower Town of Harpers Ferry. Because many of Harpers Ferry's most significant resources are located in a flood plain, the DCP led to structural modifications that now enable park buildings to better withstand flooding.

Finally, in an early permutation of the "clustering" concept, the DCP emphasized the value of existing cooperative arrangements among all the NPS entities in Harpers Ferry including the park, Harpers Ferry Center, Mather Training Center, and the

Appalachian Trail office. Taken collectively, all of these management objectives included in the 1980 DCP have had a significant impact on the park's cultural resource management program.

Despite the undeniable virtues of management plans, they are essentially static documents in an evolving world. This means that the 1980 DCP, like all plans, does not fully reflect current thinking about the park's interpretive and cultural resource activities. For example, in 1996, the park would consider any property eligible for the National Register to be a significant cultural resource. This consideration would not be limited only to resources that date to the 19th century. Furthermore, research has evolved since 1980 and opened new interpretive avenues not recognized at that time. The 1980 DCP makes no mention of Harpers Ferry's role as the site of the Second Niagara Conference in 1906 that brought W.E.B. Du Bois and other prominent African-American leaders to town. The park's appreciation of the significance of that event as a stepping stone to the formation of the NAACP will be reflected in a major celebration of the 90th anniversary of the Second Niagara Conference planned for the weekend of August 24-25, 1996.

Although written plans cannot keep pace with constantly evolving management practices, several aspects of the 1980 DCP remain remarkably relevant today. Many of those enduring topics are reflected in the pages of this issue of *CRM*. With the flood of January 1996 still very much on the minds of park staff, many of the articles in this issue touch upon the park's efforts to cope with floods. Likewise, partnerships are more important than ever today as diminishing federal budgets



Known as Anthony Hall during Storer College days, this building is now familiar to NPS employees as the Stephen T. Mather Training Center.

impact on the ability of the National Park Service to perform its mission. In that sense, Harpers Ferry NHP is both unique and fortunate among national parks to be able to work so closely with

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Donald W. Campbell

A Place in Time

Thoughts on Harpers Ferry

In 1783, Thomas Jefferson stood on a rock outcrop high above the confluence of the Shenandoah and Potomac rivers and proclaimed that the view was “stupendous and worth a voyage across the Atlantic.” The grand view of the water gap that touched Jefferson today offers the often over-stressed members of a complex technological society the healing power of nature as well as a window of memory into a less hectic 19th-century community. Gaze about Harpers Ferry from any of its varied vantage points and the abundance of sensory stimuli enter the soul like so many rivers into a sea. Annually, a half-million tourists visit Harpers Ferry National Historical Park to enjoy this picturesque scene of nature and community captured on canvas by early artists such as Rembrandt Peale, and later artists like Garnet Jex.

I often wonder what it is that people love about Harpers Ferry and once having visited Harpers Ferry, what it is about this place that invariably makes them return. One answer is visitors are captivated by the intrinsic nature of Harpers Ferry and stirred to soulful thoughts from their contact with the cultural fabric of the community. This fabric is a rich blend of human history and splendid scenic beauty, both coarsely and finely woven over time. It is the cultural history of the Algonquins, of 250 years of early-American settlement, of local events that divided and drew together a nation, and of a community in microcosm that mirrors who we are as a people.

Harpers Ferry interests visitors because it is and is not what it seems—a dichotomy of sorts. The community is the quintessential Jeffersonian town, where everyone knows his neighbor and lives in a blessed state of harmony. Or is it? The community is frequently described by visitors as quaint and charming, a movie set of sorts, but cultural memory like an artesian well flows from the depths of Harpers Ferry and spews and splashes tumultuous history in every direction, flooding the town. The attractively restored community appears to be an art form, but its character crafted over 200 years is genuine. This contrasts with today's creations of historic villages in theme parks where reality for the visitors is blurred, not only in the false facades of recreated towns, but also where the history presented is obscured from where it happened. For the park visitor, Harpers Ferry's sense of place is the place and its integrity is intact. The town is pure Americana carefully preserved in a National Register Historic District and National Historical Park.

Yet there is more, a mystery to Harpers Ferry, that is a kind of yin-yang. The whole of the place consists of forces counteracting each other in a harmony of history that is held in constant tension. Nature verses man, rivers

verses mountains, preservation verses development, north verses south, abolitionist verses slave holder, laws of God verses laws of man, craftsman verses machine, railroad verses canal barge and so forth.

Harpers Ferry is also a sacred place and hollowed ground. You walk where your ancestors walked, where epic events occurred in the forging of this nation and a cultural record remains as truth of sacrifice in another time. You see what your progenitors saw, you touch what they touched, you travel backwards in time to the roots of your



Housetops, 1925. Post card from an oil painting by Garnet W. Jex (1895–1979). Harpers Ferry Historical Association; Eric Long Photography, Gaithersburg, MD.

heritage, your country, and perhaps find insight into who you are. Harpers Ferry also has a magical and mystical quality. If you listen quietly to this landscape, you hear an abundance of nature sounds in the flowing rivers, wind in the trees, and varied wildlife. But there is more. Mixed with these natural sounds are the voices of cultural memory of the Algonquin, of Washington, Jefferson, Lincoln, Lewis, Brown, Douglass, and so many others speaking to park visitors across time.

Harpers Ferry sings its haunting song—in the mountains, rivers, and buildings—summer, winter, spring, and fall. It beckons; it calls and causes us to be good educators and stewards of this place in time—Harpers Ferry.

I invite you to read the pages in this issue of CRM to gain additional insight into the ways that we have carried out our educational and stewardship responsibilities at Harpers Ferry National Historical Park.

Donald W. Campbell is the Superintendent at Harpers Ferry NHP.

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several NPS partners located here in the same small community. However, the articles in this issue indicate that the park's partnering efforts reach well beyond the park to embrace other important partners such as the Williamsport Preservation Training Center, the Denver Service Center, and the West Virginia State Historic Preservation Office. The park's excellent working relationship with the Harpers Ferry Historical Association is also reflected in Dave Gilbert's article about the cooperative development of the park's World Wide Web (WWW) homepage.

Speaking of the Web, the 1980 DCP could never have envisioned the explosion of personal computer applications over the past decade. Harpers Ferry NHP has been fortunate to be able to ride that technological wave as well. Not only have the park's interpretive programs been advanced through a very successful WWW homepage, but also the park has benefitted from the development of several PC-based research tools discussed in Patricia Chickering's article. A computerized inventory of the park's collection of 2,000 historical photographs has proven to be an invaluable management tool that enables staff to link descriptive text with images that appear on the computer screen with astounding clarity. In addition, the park's historical and archeological research program have both made effective use of a database system which includes a summary of articles from three local newspapers with entries dating back to the early 19th century.

Although computers have changed the *modus operandi*, research remains as important to Harpers Ferry National Historical Park today as it was in the 1950s. Unlike some battlefield parks that interpret a span of history that may be limited to only a few hours or days, Harpers Ferry must cope with the need to document the town's role in the national spotlight from the time that Thomas Jefferson visited in 1783 up until the convening of the Niagara Conference in 1906. Part of the excitement of working in Harpers Ferry is the multitude of research topics which remain unexplored, but the immensity of this task is also a major challenge. This challenge is compounded by the difficulty of bringing the park alive for visitors

when the armory, the arsenal, and the industrial facilities which once stood on Virginus Island have all been destroyed through the combined impact of the Civil War and raging flood waters. The articles by Paul Shackel and Steven Lowe demonstrate the way that archeological and cultural landscape research have helped to animate resources that are no longer extant in the park today.

In summary, I would hope that this issue of CRM will serve as a gauge for measuring the cur-



The Interpretive Design Center building is the headquarters of Harpers Ferry Center, another important partner of Harpers Ferry NHP.

rent status of cultural resource management activities in the National Park Service. I also believe that state and local park managers will find topics of interest in this issue. Harpers Ferry National Historical Park would certainly not pretend to have all the answers about a very complex field like cultural resource management, but hopefully we have learned what questions to ask. We draw closer to our ultimate resource preservation goals by seeking answers to our questions. If this issue of CRM has raised questions in your mind about our cultural resource program here in this park, feel free to bring your questions to me or the other authors represented in the following pages. Even better yet, perhaps this issue has stimulated you to think about providing editor Ron Greenberg with additional CRM articles on subjects pertinent to other national, state, or local parks. In any event, please read this issue with an eye toward enjoyment and education. I believe that you will find some of each in every article.

Bruce Noble is Chief, Interpretation & Cultural Resources Management, Harpers Ferry National Historical Park.

Photos courtesy Harpers Ferry NHP.